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ABSTRACT

The paper defines the term "culture shock" and discusses the changes that this state can make in a person's behavior. Culture shock refers to the emotional and physiological reaction of high activation that is brought about by sudden immersion in a new culture. Because one's own culture shields one from the unknown and reduces the need to make choices or defend values, entrance into a new culture takes the body out of its resting state and the tension level (physical and mental readiness to cope with the situation at hand) rises. Physiologically, new stimuli that can't be classified signal to the cortex of the brain an alteration in the environment. An orientation response is triggered; extra adrenalins and nonadrenaline pour into the system, general muscle tone rises, pupils of the eyes dilate, sense organs are directed toward the incoming stimuli, and hands sweat. If the tension level is prolonged, fatigue and feelings of anxiety result. The body becomes ill unless conscious or unconscious protective measures are taken. Common symptoms of culture shock include withdrawal or a hostile and aggressive attitude, a longing for home, abnormal concern over minor things, compulsive actions (hand washing, letter writing), poor memory, and fits of anger over minor frustrations. Suggestions for reducing culture shock include preconditioning oneself by associating with international groups, looking toward a global frame of reference based on trust, and practicing body awareness to detect changes which signify a stress reaction. (Author/KC)

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HOW CULTURE SHOCK AFFECTS COMMUNICATION

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Culture shock is a personal phenomenon. It is a state of dis-ease, and like a disease, it has different effects, different degrees of severity, and different time spans for different people. Few escape it altogether, but many people who are handicapped by its presence don't recognize what's bothering them, or even that they're not acting like themselves. It's only when these people feel better that they realize the strain they were under. Culture shock symptoms are hard to isolate.

If persons becoming accustomed to a new culture do recognize that they are in a state of culture shock (and not everyone is), they seem better able to allow for its effects and to cope with the problems it causes. It also helps to know it is a natural and temporary reaction to stress. Unfortunately, those who do not recognize that they have the malady often become worse as the symptoms become problems in themselves.

To help alert future travelers to the prevalence of culture shock and because the term appears so often in studies of cross-cultural encounters, it seems appropriate to explore the phenomenon more deeply. This paper will define it, look for reasons for its universality, and, at the same time, for its variation among people. The paper will also hypothesize the changes a state of culture shock can make in a person's behaviors---assuming all observed behaviors are part of the communication process.

Definitions

Philip K. Bock (1970) describes culture shock as that disturbing feeling of disorientation and helplessness that results from direct exposure to an alien society. He emphasizes that "the more 'exotic' the alien society and the deeper one's immersion in its social life, the greater the shock" (p. 1x).

Carmon Nina (1976) calls culture shock "a somewhat psychotic state which people get into when they are in a cultural situation whose cues are misleading because they have learned either responses which are wrong for the cues or no response at all" (p. 89).

Arnold (1976) quotes Kalerve Oberg, who popularized the "culture shock" expression, as saying: "Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (p. 53).

Some authors, such as Sven Lundsted (1963) define culture shock as a form of personality maladjustment. Others go even further. George Foster (1962) says: "Culture shock is a . . . form of mental illness, and as it is true of all mental illness, the victim usually does not know he is thus afflicted" (p. 187).

It is evident that, in even this small sample of definitions, there is no agreement as to how serious the case must be to be called "culture shock." This may be why the majority of cases, not severe enough to require medical or psychological care, go unlabeled and, therefore, unrecognized and unaided. But even a "disturbed feeling" can spoil an otherwise pleasant experience. Since even small problems are more easily solved when the cause is known, it seems that mild cases also warrant the label.

A missing element in these definitions is how to account for the person whose abnormal behaviors show he is in a state of culture shock yet is not "anxious" in the sense of wanting to avoid the stimuli. A state of anxiety infers an unpleasant feeling and a motivation to rid oneself of the feeling. Ernest Beeker (1962) states: "Anxiety is a prime mover of human behavior, and man will do anything to avoid it" (p. 39). A person in culture shock is always tense, but not necessarily tense/anxious.

For the purposes of this paper and to cover all varieties of cases I shall refer to culture shock as being the emotional and physiological reaction of high activation that is brought about by sudden immersion in a new and different culture. This definition makes it possible to analyze the aroused state itself, its causes and its effects.

A Culture Provides a Safe Haven

The writing of Ernest Becker (1962:85) and others have made it clear that a basic function of culture is to lay out a predictable world in which an individual is firmly oriented. From birth a child is formally and informally taught how to behave and what to expect from the environment, including the accepted verbal signs and symbols of interaction. Common behaviors and familiar surroundings allow automatic responses and relaxed state. Within a society there is not the need to expend energy at each encounter simply to translate words and actions or to decide how to respond. People can be counted on to behave "correctly" according to a common frame of reference.

Culture therefore forestalls the anxiety of dealing with differences by reinforcing conformity. Persons want to be able to "make sense" out of their environment and to anticipate the effects their behavior will have on it and on themselves (Heider 1958). This is possible within a cultural group.

Not only does belonging to a culture shield one from the threat of the unknown but it also reduces the need to make choices or defend values and attitudes. Persons from the U.S. usually object to this sort of statement, thinking of their own culture and the wide variety of subcultures it contains. They fiercely insist that there is no common set of attitudes or values in their parent culture, but this support of individualism comes predictably---and in chorus.

Interaction in an Alien Culture Causes Culture Shock

Most authorities agree that it is the reduced ability to interact within the social and communication structure of the different society that causes most of the phenomenon of culture shock. Different climates certainly have subtle physiological and psychological effects but most other differences of the physical environment, such as unfamiliar foods, different types of housing, etc., is simply an irritation---or a source of interest---depending on one's view. The same with unfamiliar but noticeable and easily comprehended customs, like taking off (or not taking off) shoes when entering a house. These things take "getting used to" but they are concrete, tangible, observable differences and provide the sort of stimulation that tourists seek. They do not carry the threat of ambiguity, but they do add to the total picture.

This can be explained by the writing of Alvin Toffler (1970) who says: "The process of image formation and classification is, in the end, a physical process, dependent upon finite characteristics of nerve cells and body chemicals" (p. 180). Energy is needed for any physical process, thus the body is taken out of its resting state and tension level rises slightly. Note that the term "tension" is used in this paper to denote physical and mental readiness and alertness to cope with the situation at hand. This is more in line with the "activation" or general arousal" theory now accepted by most behavioral scientists (Duffy 1962, Malmo 1959) and differs from "anxiety" in that the stimulus need not necessarily be noxious. Cognition, of course, acts as a steering function and determines whether the state of physiological arousal will be subjectively labeled "anger," "joy," "excitement," "anxiety," or whatever (Schachter 1959, 1966, Appley and Trumbull 1967).

It is the hidden stress of constantly being "on guard" against sending and receiving inaccurate or inappropriate messages in a strange culture that is likely to put one over the comfort level of tension, where one is neither bored nor over-stimulated, and into the state of culture shock. All the tension and energy-saving devices that one's own culture provides are absent. The body is bombarded with alien stimuli and the automatic defense system works overtime, taking its physical and emotional toll. No weapons are effective since the enemy is invisible. Fatigue is a natural result from such a continuing state of alertness, but the body then tenses even more to resist the need to let down its guard. To relax in such a setting is to be vulnerable.

Physiological Explanation of a Stress Reaction

In his book "Future Shock" Alvin Toffler (1970) comments the existence of a special novelty-detection apparatus which matches incoming stimuli to the "neural models" in the cortex, which has stored information from past experiences. When new stimuli match previously stored models, the cortex shoots signals to the reticular activating system, which stands guard over an individual's well-being, saying that all is well, to hold its fire. But stimuli that can't be classified signify an alteration in the environment which triggers what experimental psychologists call an "orientation response (OR)." The whole body is involved in massive change. Extra adrenalins and nonadrenaline pour into the system, general muscle tone rises, pupils of the eyes dilate, sense organs are directed toward the incoming stimuli, palms sweat, etc.

The detecting apparatus is in constant operation, even during sleep, and the OR fires off thousands of times a day as we come across new ideas,

sights and sounds. We remain unaware that this is happening unless the stimulus is so strong as to cause a "startle reaction" or the build-up causes noticeable tremors or other symptoms.

The orientation response is no accident. It is nature's gift to man, one of his key adaptive mechanisms. In the years before the human animal became civilized and his dangers were more physical than social, his life often depended on the basic fight or flight reaction. It was reinforced time and time again. If the autonomic nervous system did not push the panic button, so to speak, at the first unfamiliar signal---sending the body into split-second response---it was often too late.

Today's individual has this same innate mechanism. Before the cortex has time to choose the proper way to handle ambiguous or threatening data, sugar and stored fats are released into the body and brain, muscles have tightened, extra oxygen is released, blood pressure has risen, the digestive process has turned off so that no energy is diverted from meeting the threat, and coagulation chemistry has prepared the body to resist wounds with quick clotting. He or she is ready for vigorous action. This might be good, but more often, vigorous action is opposite to what is needed to most effectively handle the situation.

Modern dangers usually involve saving face instead of saving one's skin. They are mostly abstract, social, and require negotiation and calm deliberation. The anxiety reaction only makes matters worse. Diethelm and Flach (1957) summarize a number of clinical studies and investigations with the following statement:

> Anxiety. . .decreases the span of attention and retention. . . With marked intensity of anxiety, difficulties in thinking and disturbed reasoning may occur leading to pathologic vagueness or confusion. Tension. . .may adversely affect grasp, immediate memory, and recall (p. 80).

Familiar examples are the tense/anxious speaker whose mind goes "blank" and the student who turns in a poor test paper yet remembers the right answers or can do the reasoning as soon as he leaves the classroom. Besides the reduced ability to think and concentrate under conditions of high arousal, these persons have to deal with the excessive amounts of energy present in a body ready to fight or flee. The public speaker paces the floor, drums on the podium or braces to control shaking knees. The student might chew his pencil and break out in perspiration. Both are like coiled snakes with no place to strike.

The above examples illustrate the short-term high-stress situation which is soon followed by a sigh of relief and relaxation and rejuvenation of the body. They do not happen often enough to cause a problem, mainly because they are avoided whenever possible. High-stress situations which are pleasurable, such as athletic contests, have built-in socially-accepted ways to use the extra physical energy.

It is the long term, unrelieved stress that causes illness or behavior change. This type of stress may be an unavoidable life change, a sojourn in another country, or the gradual and unnoticeable build-up of constant small stress reactions to the multiple stimuli and pressure of normal living. At length this turns into a chronic tension trait and the "revved up" feeling is accepted as natural.

Ruesch and Bateson (1968) blame the widespread frequency of manifest signs of anxiety in America to the public tolerance of anxiety. They say it is one of our cultural traits to value achievement, particularly economic development, and only the alerted individual can cope quickly and effectively with the rapidly changing conditions of his surroundings. As they say, "A state of constant alarm is necessary for people who are geared for

action" (p. 145).

The consistent physical bracing of body and "holding-in" of emotions is similar to applying brakes to a car which has a stuck gas pedal. It works for a while, but unless a way is found to let up on the gas the brakes will wear out and disaster will result. As Wolff (1950) points out, ". . .man, feeling threatened, may use for long-term purposes devices designed for short-term needs. . .and when so utilized may damage structures and so destroy the organism they were designed to protect (p. 1078).

Thomas H. Holmes, working at the University of Washington, has created an ingenious research tool named the Life-Change Units Scale, a list of changes that may occur in a person's life ranked according to the degree of coping or adjustment required for each. He found that those with high life-change units in one year (several demanding experiences such as a divorce, a job change, a death in the family) had more illness the following year than those with low life-change units. He also found that the higher the change score, the more severe the illness was likely to be. Studies were done with thousands of subjects in both the U.S. and Japan. Commander Ransom J. Arthur, head of the U.S. Navy Medical Neuropsychiatric Research Unit at San Diego, helped with the experiment and explained the results thus: "There may well be generalized body defense systems that prove inadequate. . .If you've had many changes in your life within a short time, this places a great challenge on your body. . .(it) might overwhelm its coping mechanisms" (cited by Toffler 1970:327-333).

Malmo (1970) also offers evidence that continuous over-arousal may result in impairment of central inhibitory mechanisms which accounts for the over-reaction to stress by the chronically anxious person.

Culture Shock as a Stress Reaction

Bock (1970) in the introduction to his book Culture Shock emphasizes that culture shock is not to be confused with the "life shock" that results from exposure to traumatic experiences associated with general living. I submit that, although the proximate cause of the two may be somewhat different, the results (physical and/or emotional problems) and the underlying cause (exhaustion of the body's natural defense system) are the same. A difference would be that defensive measures are more able to be taken by someone during culture shock, whereas the experiences in "life shock" are less avoidable. In this case wear and tear on the physical body is spared.

It is obvious that the OR (orientation response) would be in pretty constant operation when someone enters a strange new culture. His or her system is likely to often be flooded with adrenalin, have increased heart pumping, etc., an exhilarating feeling until there is a too-soon exhaustion of the body's limited supply of quick energy. But even high exhilaration can put one over his optimal level of efficient functioning for most tasks, especially those using complex reasoning, and bracing may occur. At any rate, high arousal over long periods of time will lead to anxiety (Malmo 1957). This may explain the oft-repeated statements that short-term visitors or new arrivals are "fascinated by the new" and not until weeks later when the immigrant must"seriously cope with real conditions of life" does culture shock set in. Unless the person was passively being led around, coping must have begun at the time of arrival. The process gradually wears down his resistance and danger signals start flashing.

Authorities like Harold Lasswell of Yale and the Soviet scientist E. N. Sokolov have proved that relearning (an everyday circumstance in a new

culture) requires even more energy than learning. This is reported by Toffler (1970), who adds: "The OR is particularly stressing when a novel event or fact challenges one's whole preconceived world view" (p. 336). This is also relevant since a person operating outside the safe boundaries of his or her own culture cannot help but face ambiguity, uncertainty, an attack on cherished attitudes and values and difficulty in communication, among other things. This also means that the arousal state is often joined by threat perception so that the full array of protectors would be mobilized, not just the look-outs or the fun-and-games crowd.

The Effects of Culture Shock

Severe cases of culture shock may result in physical or emotional breakdown of some kind as was previously shown. This will make rest obligatory and recuperation possible. It could be hypothesized that the dedicated, determined-to-do-right, anxious-to-please, highly motivated persons are the most likely to become physically ill unless they get copious amounts of rest. This type probably brings along the trait of chronic tension-anxiety and, with such a good start, the extra stress quickly puts them over their tolerance level. They are more likely to ignore signs of discomfort and push themselves beyond safe limits.

Other people under the same stimuli react differently. They may have stronger bodies or more tolerance for stress, or notice stress effects sooner and employ defensive measures. Learned reactions to unfamiliar stimuli also differ. Some highly-structured or rigid individuals have great difficulty handling the differences and the ambiguity all around them. Others have learned to "hang loose" and are not bothered at all.

Since the majority of people are neither incapacitated nor completely relaxed in the setting of a strange culture, most will have medium-to-high

arousal of their physical and emotional states from the time of arrival. If prolonged, some level of anxiety will occur which is linked with fatigue and a conscious or unconscious need to protect oneself. The effect of this is to employ behaviors to escape the feeling. These behaviors would be the same defensive mechanisms used in any situation of threat, simply more noticeable and more maladaptive because they usually go against the purpose of the stay. Also, the patterns of anxiety management in one culture may well serve as provocation to greater anxiety in another.

Avoidance and withdrawal are well known defensive mechanisms. The quickest way to afford relief is to leave the country or insulate against as much contact with the local population as possible. If these routes are not taken, any number of unconscious psychological ploys may be used, all involving communication and most of them creating difficulties of their own.

The threatened individual may make himself feel better by becoming aggressive toward the new country, attacking values, customs, climate---anything. He or she may regress, yearn for home, become dependent on others. The victim may become excessively concerned with unimportant details, something he feels he may be able to conquer. Other familiar defensive mechanisms are displacement, rationalization, identification.

High tension is always coupled with emotional arousal and could cause anger and hurt feelings to come easily and unnecessary fear over being cheated, lost, injured, or what have you. Someone who can handle his emotions well and has made fair adjustment will still probably be bothered by minor tension symptoms. Concentration is difficult and he may lose track of his possessions or forget names. He may embarrass himself by having to

ask for the same information several times, or by mixing up times and directions. He may simply not see what is very obvious to others.

Where there is an unfamiliar verbal and nonverbal language to translate, message reception is difficult even when the receiver can give it full and undivided attention. If an appreciable portion of energy is being used to protect oneself through involuntary stress reactions, there is not much left to do the more important task. As stated by Jack Gibb (1961):

> Defense arousal prevents the listener from concentrating upon the message. Not only do defensive communicators send off multiple value, motive, and affect cues, but also defensive recipients distort what they receive. As a person becomes more and more defensive, he becomes less and less able to perceive accurately the motives, the values, and the emotions of the sender (p. 141).

A defensive listener is literally "on the defensive." He may take offense when none is meant. It has been proven that ideas and perceptions will be distorted to reduce threat (Fenz and Epstein, 1969). The familiar selective perception phenomenon may be in operation, as well as other protective screens like the use of stereotypes and prejudices. These help avoid the expenditure of energy and the risk of open investigation, plus the possibility of having to readjust attitudes. The old rut is safe and comfortable.

Rokeach (1960) saw threat as leading to dogmatism in individuals, particularly as a defense against feelings of aloneness and isolation. He states: "Thus, the more closed the belief-disbelief system, the more do we conceive it to represent, in its totality, a tightly woven network of cognitive defenses against anxiety" (p. 69).

A review of the social sciences literature uncovers other studies which report characteristics of the tense-anxious listener. Postman and

Bruner (1948) note that perceptual behavior is disrupted under stress, becomes less well-controlled, and is less adaptive. Janis and Feshback (1954) state:

> It seems probable that many individuals with chronic anxiety symptoms suffer from internal sources of anxiety stimulation to such a degree that interfering responses occur in almost any communication situation, resulting in poor attention, inadequate comprehension, or a comparatively low degree of acceptance due to unresponsiveness to the incentives contained in the communication (p. 163).

Berblinger (1963) states that ". . .patients who suffer from chronic tension states are poor verbal communicators, sluggish or even viscous in their emotional exchange or rapport with others. . ." (p. 40).

A relationship has also been proved between high tension-anxiety and misperception of stimuli (Bruner and Postman, 1949), inability to reason inductively (Welch and Long, 1946), impaired ability to retain information, give attention, think, and learn (Diethelm and Jones, 1947), and a jamming and disorganization of the communication network (Ruesch, 1957). O'Brien (1957) was one of the many researchers who noted the reduced ability to solve complex reasoning tasks under high tension-anxiety.

Authorities, therefore, agree that a person in a too-high state of arousal, especially if accompanied by feelings of anxiety, is distracted by "internal noise" and cannot give full attention to the messages he sends and receives. Neither is he free from restraint to "tune in" empathically to the persons with whom he is interacting to search for feeling and meaning tones. A person in culture shock does not fit the requirements for a good communicator.

Summary

Someone operating in another culture often feels confused and helpless. His normal props are gone, simple chores are very complicated, and he feels

like he is walking on ice. If he is "broad minded" and full of good will he exposes himself to a myriad of different sights, sounds, smells, attitudes, values and assumptions. All have the potential of upsetting his normal base of security, his own cultural givens.

This nearly always arouses one's system to a high tension level which, if prolonged, results in fatigue and feelings of anxiety. The body eventually "wears out" and illness results unless conscious or unconscious protective measures are taken.

Common symptoms of culture shock are a rejection of the new environment by withdrawal or a hostile and aggressive attitude, regressing and a longing for home, great dependency, abnormal concern over minor things, such as aches and pains, compulsive actions (hand washing, letter writing, etc.), inability to concentrate, poor memory, fits of anger over minor frustrations, loss of possessions, and others.

Usual defenses include to leave or psychologically withdraw, perceive only what's familiar or reinforcing, to depend on preconceptions and stereotypes, and to adopt rigid thinking and structured activities.

One safe conclusion regarding the phenomenon of culture shock is that there are no safe conclusions---there are too many variables. One of the author's students was a highly tense-anxious young man and seemed a likely candidate for a bad case of culture shock. He enjoyed an overseas experience with no bad effects. As he explained it, when he left U.S. soil he also left behind all his fears and constraints. Not knowing what was expected of him in the strange country, and feeling no obligation to find out, he acted just as he pleased---for the first time in his life. Perhaps he was like the visiting professor at the University of Mexico who mentioned

that he had felt no culture shock during the time he had been on their campus. His Mexican colleague replied that he believed it was the Mexican students who had been absorbing most of the shock (Barna, 1972).

Suggestions

Although it's not the purpose of this paper to suggest more appropriate ways of avoiding or reducing debilitating culture shock, the reader may be interested in a few ideas.

1. Precondition or desensitize yourself to the type of stimuli likely to be encountered. (Eat in ethnic restaurants; associate with groups of international students; go to church services in another language; shop in ethnic neighborhoods, etc.)

2. Expose yourself to many types of people, ideologies and world views so that differences come to seem normal and interesting rather than threatening.

3. Look toward a global frame of reference based on trust and low boundaries.

4. Be situational in relationships to others and in connections to cultures; refrain from absolutes.

5. Accept and become secure in your own identity so that there is little chance for serious loss of self esteem and more freedom for open investigation.

6. Expect acceptance rather than rejection, cooperation rather than annoyance.

7. Practice body awareness so that changes which signify a stress reaction can be identified and counteracted.

8. Work on reducing the level of tenseness used as a normal operating base. Learn to tense muscles just enough (not more than enough)

to do the task at hand. Get rid of residual tension. This will turn into an energy-saving habit and raise the body's tension tolerance level.

9. Practice relaxation responses so that you can learn to control your body rather than allowing it to control you.

10. Rest!

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